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In a Class all of *their* own

The incomprehensiveness of art education

John Beagles

“Over the last thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. As any number of theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of the ‘natural order’, must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible attainable.”

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Zero books, 2009)

Prologue

As is often the case, events have over taken this article. When I started writing this text, art education was in its familiar state of permanent crisis. Certainly it seemed those working in art education had become battle fatigued by the burden of increased managerialism and its attendant bureaucracy. Now, however, it seems we have accelerated into a new phase.

In recent years it’s been fashionable, with some justification, to accuse critics of resorting to crude economic determinism when discussing culture and education. However, the consequences of massively increasing tuition fees and by extension student debt, especially in the humanities, will, if they go ahead unchallenged, result in the most decisive and seismic changes to UK education since 1945. That of course is the point. Reversing and eradicating those socially progressive advances (however compromised they have been) is the ideological objective of this government, as it was of the last. In education, the core values of a comprehensive system designed to “suit the many as well as the old fitted the few”¹ have been subject to systematic dismembering. Consistently the argument has been that this system is unsustainable. The idea that this is simply how it is, is the basis of Mark Fisher’s useful notion of ‘capitalist realism’.

However, while the crony capitalism of this system may have become more naked, David Harvey argues the restoration project of neoliberalism has always been about an ideological and political endeavor to restore class power to small elites.² In 2008, Naomi Klein framed the project this way:

“...that really what we have been living is a liberation movement, indeed the most successful liberation movement of our time: the movement by capital to liberate itself from all constraints on its accumulation. For those who say this ideology’s failing, I beg to differ. I actually believe it has been enormously successful, just not on the terms that we learn about in University of Chicago textbooks. That I don’t think the project actually has been the development of the world and the elimination of poverty. I think this has been a class war waged by the rich against the poor, and I think that they won. And I think the poor are fighting back.”³

The Ship is Sinking

“I think anger is very important, and, contrary to the classical tradition, in Seneca say, I think it is the first political emotion. It is often anger that moves the subject to action. Anger is the emotion that produces motion, the mood that moves the subject.”

Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (Verso, 2007)

In recent years there has been a steady flow of publications, magazine articles and impassioned letters decrying the current state of and gloomy future prophesied for art education. *Art Monthly* was prominent in describing this crisis, devoting

tracts of the magazine to various contributors’ thoughts on the subject. The majority of these often-impassioned defences and polemics focused on and were united by their condemnation of the impact of New Labour’s enthusiastic advancing of neoliberal ideology upon state funded ‘public’ university education – aka ‘corporate pedagogy’. As numerous voices stated, the accession of this cast-as-technocratic market rationalism (managerialism) is creating a dysfunctional relationship between student and tutor, one which is more akin to that of consumer/ customer and ‘knowledge provider’.⁴ This reciprocal commercial relationship is further muddled, because, as Fisher has written, it’s never too clear if the students are the consumers or the actual products being produced.⁵

While the magazine pages and websites of art publications (even *Frieze* ran with a similar ‘debate’) were consumed with a largely negative perception of art schools’ future, other critical voices in the ‘sector’ were less vociferous in tone, keener to stay away from too much overt discussion of the politics of policy – involvement in structural issues often came across as being beneath many. However, this work was similarly underpinned by a shared sense of emergency. In books such as ‘Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)’ and ‘A.C.A.D.E.M.Y’, contributors proposed how art schools could and should respond to the shifting position of art and culture in a world dominated by Fisher’s pervasive business ontology. The talk was of alternatives to existing models. In articles by educators such as Yve Lomax, Simon O’Sullivan, and Irit Rogoff, the focus was less on responding to economic and policy assaults and more on trying to identify the possibilities and potentialities of developing radically new forms of and locations for art education. Against the instrumentalism and resultant specialisation of market driven aesthetics, they proposed alternative practices that develop ‘embedded criticality’, ‘non teleological epistemologies’, and ‘problem based learning’.⁶ The danger of this approach lies in what futurology skillfully avoids, namely any assessment of *where* we are and *how* to get somewhere else. Rather, it tends to simply ‘wish’ us out of ‘crisis’ while acquiescing to the imperatives of ‘now’, as witnessed by the sudden Big Society-oriented academic research interest in ‘co-operatives’.

The pervasive sense of crisis that saturated these different responses continues to be hard to dispute. While it’s difficult to countenance the rather self-serving mythologising of a Halcyon period of “free and open zones of experimentation”⁷ which often underpins defences of art school values (and perhaps secures its conservatism), this doesn’t invalidate the anger prompted by the application to education of neo-liberal ideology and its beliefs in market liberalism and managerialism.

However, while signs of the pathogens infecting the system were hard to ignore, there was a problem in the focus on the reasons for the breakdown. Reading the varied discussions, the defences and alternatives felt hampered in their potential by a blind spot. The majority of these exchanges paid insufficient attention to the ongoing, but now it seems exponentially increasing, problem of class exclusion within art schools and the resultant rise of a homogeneous student body. This is an old story but it’s clearly getting worse and will continue to do so – not least due to tuition fee increases⁸ and ‘globalisation’ representing the imposition of this neoliberal ideology on a transnational scale. The consequences of this are dire, and not

just for art schools. The one solution I can see – as a practicing artist and tutor – is a renewed, reimagined, core insertion of comprehensive education values as absolutely essential. To be clear, this isn’t just about economics, or questions of diversity, or core values of universal access based on fairness and equality. As fundamental as these are, the assertion here is that a diverse, comprehensive mix of students is absolutely intrinsic to art school culture, pedagogy and by extension the creation of wider culture that it informs.

Art for a few

“The one ‘selecting’ institution that readily agreed to participate did so at the insistence of a senior manager who was concerned that their admissions tutors were ‘trying to make everyone middle class.’”

‘Art for a Few’, National Arts Learning Network⁹

NALN’s recent report, ‘Art for a Few’, reaffirmed that for art school education issues pertaining to the lack of social diversity are still central; identifying problems relating to continuing overt and covert exclusion (non selection) of students from ‘outside’ the dominant middle class strata. As the report remarks, “the art academy has a deeply embedded, institutionalized class and ethnically biased notion of a highly idealized student against whom they measure students”.¹⁰ While there are many programmes run by national art schools aimed directly at widening the intake of students from outside the ‘natural’ or ‘usual’ selection pools (the report highlights how some tutors refer disparagingly to students as WPs, aka Widening Participation Students¹¹), profound problems still persist.

The report’s figures (based on those provided by UCAS) state that those students classified as coming from the lower socio-economic classes (referred to as SEC 4-7’s; which range from those in routine occupations to small employers¹²) in Fine Art represent 24-33% of the whole student population (these figures refer to the period between 2004/5 - 2007/8, and compares to 32-32.4% for all HE students in the UK coming from households classified as SEC 4-7¹³). As this is a mean average, this figure needs to be digested with some skepticism. Fluctuations between geographical areas and schools suggest a far more pronounced spiking of those statistics at some schools. For instance, some controversy surrounded this question of class composition in relation to Glasgow School of Art – in 2002 a *Guardian* article ran with the headline ‘Glasgow “posher” than Oxbridge’¹⁴, while a *wikipedia* entry in 2008, stating that its class diversity was the third worst in the UK after Oxford and Cambridge, provoked a principled defence of the school’s record on inclusion. While the figures that prompted these articles on the alleged elitism (which related to a 2002 report) were flatly disputed, with some justification, they do point to possible fluctuations within the figure of 24-33% inclusion. For instance, the mean average figures are undoubtedly upwardly skewed by the much higher than average composition of SEC 4-7 category students (working class students) at schools such as Wolverhampton and Sheffield.

The Good Student and the Consensual Idyll

‘Art for a Few’ evidenced how the sample art schools’ admissions procedures were formally and informally prejudiced against students from outside the usual spheres of selection (the

WP student). As the report noted: “Normalised student identity is subtly held in place whilst the WP student is constituted as ‘Other’, deserving of higher education access but only to ‘other’ kinds of discourse and institutions.”¹⁵

The kind of exclusion operating within art school culture at the point of entry into the system then revolves around naturalised assumptions about the right type of student. Notions of good communication skills are, as the report makes clear, “judged from a white, middle class perspective”¹⁶, which result in judgments [...] being enacted, which are claimed to be ‘fair’ and ‘transparent’ and even ‘value free’ but [are] clearly (from the long list of quite specific and value loaded sets of expectations) [...] embedded in histories of classed and racialised inequalities/ misrecognitions and complex power relations”.¹⁷ The report goes on to question the increasing emphasis on academic qualifications as another way in which students from the SEC 4-7 category are prejudiced against. High quality academic qualifications are identified as being a further privilege many will have been denied – “class-biased ideas of effective signs of intelligence – which seem natural and innate are partial and class centrist.”¹⁸

Once they are in...

What the report makes clear is how art schools at the point of selection continue to play an active if largely occluded role in what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed ‘cultural reproduction’. Bourdieu’s analysis is fairly explicit in setting out how education plays an active role in perpetuating class-based inequalities between generations (i.e. people from the same backgrounds become artists). For Bourdieu, a key factor is that this cultural reproduction frequently occurs despite the best efforts of those involved in education – exclusion operates often as a result of hidden assumptions on the part of educators.

The mechanisms of cultural reproduction don’t just begin and end at the point of selection. The perhaps thornier question is what kind of experiences those “lucky enough to get in” to art school from outside the usual territories have once they’ve crossed the threshold?

If, as ‘Art for a Few’ reports, there are in many art schools implicit class-centrist assumptions regarding what kind of applicants will make the best future art students, it’s logical that these assumptions (biases) continue to operate with regard to the kind of teaching that occurs within those very same institutions and the kind of education experiences students from the SEC 4-7 groups can expect to experience. The nature of these experiences may well be more difficult to ascertain or ‘prove’, but if the model of the ‘good student’ is a pervasive model, it does seem reasonable to assume that those same internalised categories for grading and assessing students at the point of entry continue to operate internally within the pedagogic culture of the schools.

It’s a shame that the NALN report didn’t explore this further. Issues over inclusion at the point of entry for those figured as ‘other’ are perhaps well known. But questions regarding these students’ experiences once in art school are more problematic. For instance, researching the social background of students who drop out of art school would be significant. This kind of research might highlight how even in schools where SEC 4-7 inclusion appears high, problems of self-exclusion and the equally problematic one of ghettoisation are high, both as a result of implicit and explicit pedagogic practices. As Bourdieu’s analysis shows, the most effective means of cultural reproduction is the generation of the feeling (‘habitus’) that ‘that’s not for me’. The worry is the distinct possibility a two tier culture, with clusters/pockets/ groups of distinct students, operates within art schools, something which isn’t being flagged up by statistics of inclusion and diversity.



Too Obvious

Within any discussion of exclusion and the need for embedding of comprehensive values within art school culture lies, as detailed in the NALN report, the thorny question of class division, hierarchies and exclusion. The problem of focusing on this issue of class and exclusion within art education is ‘difficult’. Not least because talking about class more broadly is in itself a deeply troubling thing for many to do. Firstly because, as David Harvey has written about at length, there is a pervasive, ideological issue today in discussing class at all. As he notes:

“Progressives of all stripes seem to have caved in to Neoliberal thinking since it is one of the primary fictions of Neoliberalism that class is a fictional category that exists only in the imagination of socialists and crypto-communists...The first lesson we must learn, therefore, is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is. The mass of the population has either to resign itself to the historical and geographical trajectory defined by overwhelming and ever increasing upper class power, or respond to it in class terms.”¹⁹

Elsewhere, Harvey goes on to discuss this ideological sleight of hand in greater detail. The idea of a classless society or the notion that class distinctions are no longer applicable is itself an ideological construct. Few would dispute, and Harvey doesn’t himself, that traditional, simplistic divisions of society into working, middle and upper class are no longer appropriate – for one they fail to take into account the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality – but to extrapolate and state as many do that class issues have disappeared is at best delusional and at worst ideologically self serving. The statistics Harvey uses to show how much richer the rich have got during the last thirty years are stark.²⁰

While Harvey and others identify this naturalising of class inequality and class power as the central, pivotal achievement of the neoliberal project during the last forty years, there has been a far longer silence in the art world as regards class, and it remains the elephant in the room. Rarely does it make any kind of substantive appearance. Although the collaborative group Bank made numerous, highly entertaining excursions into this territory in the mid 1990s, it has generally remained the guilty liberal secret that has propelled many well intentioned participatory practices and socially inclusive public art works. Unfortunately, this ‘traditional’ often embarrassed, guilt-ridden silence that dominates within the art sector needs now, as a matter of urgency, to be broken within the spaces of education.

To be Comprehensively rewritten (out of history)

Predictably, following Milton Friedman’s and the Chicago boys’ credo, it is every day clearer that ‘crisis opportunities’ are being manipulated and

the UK’s current Conservative/ Liberal coalition government is implementing Klein’s ‘shock doctrine’. Within the sphere of state education, as many Tories have been gleefully pleased to announce, the opportunities for Conservatives to further privatise are the ones set up for them by the previous Labour government. Education secretary Michael Gove’s²¹ recently announced plans for schools in England to opt out of Local Authority control point to this – thus green lighting the perennial Tory dream of finally demolishing the state supported comprehensive system. After years of ‘softening up’ by both Tories and New Labour, the comprehensive system, like the health service, is sufficiently on its knees that the ‘sound logic’ of the necessity of applying ‘business ontology’ to education seems likely to be passed without significant parliamentary opposition – who, after all, is there to oppose it?

It is clear to most that this legislation, coupled with what is already known as the postcode lottery²², will result in the effective privatisation of the state education system. With a certain historical irony, a moment of crisis is being used to implement legislation that will reverse a previous moment of crisis legislation – which was after all what the Keynesian welfare state emerged from. The consequences will effectively plunge us back to a pre-welfare state, an explicit hierarchal division of education. For an ideology that finds abhorrent the very notion of anything public and outwith (seemingly) the logic of profit, the situation looks perilous. Writing from the context of US education, Henry A Giroux’s analysis is prescient:

“Public schools are under attack not because they are failing or are inefficient, but because they are public, an unwanted reminder of a public sphere and set of institutions whose purpose is to serve the common good and promote democratic ends.”²³

We are then faced with a pivotal moment, one where the very idea of public subsidised free universal comprehensive education is in danger of being erased from the imagination as a popular viable ideal. The Conservative assault is hardly surprising, but is exasperated by the manner in which prognosis of its ‘natural death’, its ‘flawed logic’ as a system, has been internalised and accepted widely across society – the ‘natural impossibility’ of a comprehensive system owes its success to a similar ideological sleight of hand deployed when (not) discussing class.

Faced with this moment, it is clear to me that issues about exclusion need to be equally embedded alongside all curricula and pedagogic innovation. It is no longer forgivable or strategically appropriate to regard them as appendices to be dealt with by external WP programmes. Tackling exclusion and transforming the culture of art schools are two inextricable sides of the same coin.

Focusing on issues about student satisfaction, or criteria of the latest evaluation regime of Higher Education, resources, or alternatively suggesting the creation of independent small scale artist-run

art schools, still means that the wrong questions about, and causes for, the current state of art education are being proposed. At present, either the defences of art education are too reactive, and willing to replicate and reinforce the neoliberal agenda, for instance the focus on student dissatisfaction reinforces the paradigm of student consumer and teacher provider; or, as with much of the discussion around new art schools becoming unshackled from the state, are undermined by a complete failure to identify how they would address this core issue of exclusion and diversity – small scale, privately funded independents would probably face greater challenges than pre-existing schools in terms of diversity.

The second aspect is the inability to imaginatively and publicly state the need for the centrality of comprehensive values as core to any reimagined notion of art school – as being both an ethical, and, more practically, a structural necessity for the informing of artists and art – should also be best understood as part of the bigger problem now facing those who used to, once upon a time, refer to themselves as being of the Left. The problem is the familiar inability²⁴ to popularise a seductive, imaginative alternative to the bankrupt values of our consumerist-capitalist-entertainment-network, which permeates the art education sector too. Just as the Left has largely failed in popularising a set of alternative values²⁵ (Simon Critchley regards this as fundamentally a problem of naming²⁶), within art education there has been a similar failure of the imagination to express comprehensive values as core. The sort of ideological debates that could distinguish between liberalism and democracy. Consequently, there’s been no ‘big idea’ to get behind – e.g. key values such as the principle of autonomy as the means to defend culture from government, and the public interest which that principle is meant to protect – just an increasingly confused, often tribal, partisan defence of something frequently vague, intangible and contradictory. This is a particular problem for art education, as it has always been hampered by its epistemological instability, something that since the breakdown of rigid Modernist certainties has increased. While this loss of particular forms of authoritarian power and control is a good thing, it has created a pedagogic vacuum within art education since filled by neoliberal dogma. The loss of an emancipatory project or dimension to education – body snatched by an ‘entrepreneurialism’ of the self – finds echoes in other areas. For example, both Nancy Fraser and Nina Power have recently written about the depressing consequences for Feminism of a similar decoupling of its radical politics, or as Fraser puts it, Feminism’s ‘emancipatory edge’²⁷ from its everyday practice, as a result of neoliberalism’s *granting* of its demands. As Power pithily remarks; “stripped of any internationalist and political quality, feminism becomes about as radical as a diamante phone cover”.²⁸ The fundamental differences here centre on the sort of democratic society one believes in: a technocratic and managerial one, mainly geared towards supporting freedoms of expression hedged within consumerism, or one geared towards freedoms and equalities in public discourse as a whole.

‘Interesting things happen in art schools because of an interesting mix of students’

While a publicly stated commitment to the ideals of comprehensive education, to directly confront issues related to class exclusion as being vital to the production of artistic culture, may be read as archaic, an example of one of Žižek’s “lost causes”, it’s telling how frequently in a sublimated form the ‘ideals’ of comprehensive education haunt contemporary discussions about art school and the future of art education.

In Steven Madoff’s ‘Art School Propositions for the 21st century’ there is, for example, a text

by Boris Groys entitled ‘Education by infection’. Groys examines the challenges faced by educators teaching in a post post-modernist “free for all”²⁹ culture, where no one tradition dominates. In this new pedagogic space, he writes, “just as art after Duchamp can be anything, so art education can be anything”. Groys’ “solution” for how art education can be reinvigorated uses an idea coined by Malevich, namely the “trope of biological evolution”. Adopting Malevich’s work, Groys discusses how artists (and art students within the confines of an art school) need to “modify their immune systems of their art in order to incorporate new aesthetic bacilli”.³⁰ For Groys, this means artists/ students/ educators opening themselves up to distinctly different forms of work, experiences, subjectivities and identities. Groys states that this was an essential aspect of progressive modernism that needs to be reaffirmed and grasped: “radical modern art proposed that artists get themselves infected with exteriority [and] become sick through the contagions of the outside world, and become an outsider to oneself”.³¹ (There is not scope here to also critique the pathologising of communion in Groys’ motif.)

For Groys, this is essential for the production of art that avoids the kind of stagnation and stasis favoured by “sincere artists”. Sincere artists, in Groys’ analysis, are dull and powerless, because by being sincere they follow a repetitious programme that only reproduces “their own existing taste” and only “deals with their own existing identity”. In contrast, Groys argues that the production of creative, “insincere artists” (in creative industry newspeak – to try to recoup it from market avidity – those who favour ‘risk and experimentation’) is fundamentally predicated on openness. This is, for Groys, the essential characteristic feature of art schools’ “modernist inheritance”. An inheritance that favours the revelation of “the other within oneself”, and asks the student to become ‘other’ – to “become infected by Otherness”.

In another context, Iain Biggs in his article ‘Art Education and the Radical imagination’ makes similar claims to Groys’ for the need to assert the importance of inter-relatedness (‘cross pollution of students’) within education. Biggs talks about the need to embrace the “reanimating of alternative narratives, based on values inherent in alternative histories and memories” which are distinct to those validated by the new establishment. That only by turning away from the competitive, market driven, unethical mode of being in art school (heroic individualism and the progressive careerist model) can we resurrect a more transformative role for art. Biggs argues that only by changing pedagogical practices can this be done. For him this is about ditching what Paulo Freire critically called the “banking concept of education” – “where knowledge is seen as a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those whom they consider to know nothing” – to one which is far less hierarchal and is centered on problem posing and a relationship where students and tutors develop, simultaneously, powers of “critical solicitude”. For Biggs this is representative of “good educational practice”, the kind of pedagogic practice that ensures that teaching is based on: “A real concern for the students’ self understanding, because genuine self understanding is always an understanding of our interrelatedness to others, and so finally to questions about the common good in a just society.”

For Biggs, the shift away from the competitive, career orientated individualism, dominant in much academia including art education, towards what he calls an “ethical imagination” – a capacity for imaginative empathy – is “fundamental to any just society”; “it makes possible our ability to allow the ‘other’ its own existence – not for my sake, nor because it conforms to my scheme of things, but for its own sake”.

The fact is that experience of the other is now frequently pedagogically manufactured as a segregated curriculum activity – students or



artists sent out on field trips to carry out *research* into what ‘non art people’ are like. And this is the problem – the extent to which multiculturalism in practice fails to involve interculturalism. If ‘contact’ with the ‘alien’ or ‘other’ is only ever temporary and structurally prescribed, the kind of interrelatedness, ‘infection’ and ‘ethical imagination’ argued for will at best only ever be transitory. Where art education has, all too briefly, ‘worked’³², the mutual interrelatedness that Groys talks about as being essential for the infection of the artist with foreign bacilli is embedded within education ecology, not as a bolted on arranged trip to ‘foreign lands’ or manufactured introductions to ‘exotic others’. In an education system that is comprehensive, these experiences of being challenged and opened up to foreign subjectivities and identities that contradict who or what you are, and which are frequently antagonistic to our position, is structurally integrated into the fabric of the pedagogy. This bringing together of distinct identities produces the opposite to an “idyll of consensus”³³ (a homogenized space of agreement) which is, as the statistics indicate, becoming increasingly common within schools purified of ‘infections’ and ‘others’.

Missed critiques of multiculturalism

New Labour posited multiculturalism’s ‘cultural diversity’ as an innocuous competition of peers, rather than an unequal struggle, writing over inscriptions of inequality and conflict. However, behind the egalitarian rhetoric, issues of inclusion and control were obscured by talking as if all cultures were distinct and equal. A central issue in the politics of multiculturalism has been its ability to simultaneously recognise and disavow difference – political turmoil has instead been defined as the result of failed communication. Under new Labour, institutions were increasingly called upon to demonstrate their multicultural credentials – who benefitted from the use of multiculturalism as a signifier of institutional value when institutional statements of multicultural purpose have not evidently resulted in tangible changes in staffing or pedagogic practice?

Pragna Patel:
“Sure. And what’s happened in education in the last decade is just a kind of liberal multiculturalism. There’s been no actual antiracism, just ‘recognising diversity’ – different religious festivals – a lesson on how not to tackle racism in schools. One main finding was that the kind of antiracism schools espoused was dogmatic and moralistic which was divisive and guilt-inducing, quite dangerous. One thing I find frustrating is that the media are discussing these issues in such a compartmentalised

way. There's no attempt to link economics or social deprivation with racism, for instance.... But this is not my idea of a civil rights movement. If race is the only focus there's a danger of returning to a hierarchy of oppressions, whereas my experience is that one has to deal with things simultaneously.”³⁴

As Homi Bhabha states:
“To question the deployment of ‘difference’ as a counter to the negatively perceived ‘totalisation’, is not to deny the fecundity of a notion which insists on subjectivity as polymorphous, community as heterogeneous, social formations as mutable and culture as vagrant. It is to recognise that ‘difference’ has been diverted by a postmodernist criticism as a theoretical ruse to establish a neutral, ideology-free zone from which the social dissension and political contest inscribed in the antagonist pairing of coloniser/colonised, have been expelled. A policy statement defining difference in terms of bland variations on a placid continuum, unhinged from the planned inequalities of actually existing social regimes and political struggles...”³⁵

The consequence of this consensus – where social dissension and political contest have been expelled – appears to conform to a broader technologically produced narcissism; as Robert Hassan writes of the negative aspect of new technologies:

“Through the technological ability to be exposed only to what you want to be exposed to, opinions, views and ideas ring as if in an echo chamber. As Sunstein puts it: ‘New technologies, emphatically including the internet, are dramatically increasing people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others’. More than ever there is the tendency to listen out only for ‘louder echoes of their own voices’. This presents a major problem as far as a vibrant and diverse democratic functioning is concerned.”³⁶

A homogenised student body produces its own form of this broader technologically manufactured narcissism – ‘I only engage with ideas that reinforce my pre-existing values’. It also increasingly appears to replicate the production of consensual islands or ghettos produced by broader social engineering (or apartheid) dominant in our cities and towns (‘Where are Britain’s working classes?’³⁷). These characteristics should be anathema to art school culture. The consequences of encountering distinct subjectivities, namely forms of dissensus and antagonism, should exist between students, and occasionally between student and tutor (something which the wholesale adoption of a consumerist ethic absolutely negates against). Indeed, butting up against a dominant culture, imbued with an untroubled sense of its own unquestionable value was (and remains) a depressing experience for those not ‘blessed’ with an inalienable sense of being at home within ‘real’ culture.³⁸ However, the often antagonistic debates created between these ‘others’, those whose subjectivity is often motivated by being bored and out of place, and those at home within culture, frequently leads to a questioning of dominant modes of thought. In the case of art, it has led to fundamental questions regarding the ontology of art – those radical destabilizing acts that, like Conceptualism, produce the sickness Groys argues for. This is mainly because students from outside the strata of ‘normal art students’ are frequently, because of their backgrounds, more troubled by the divisions in the broader culture that allow for arts’ ‘freedom’.³⁹

I’m not adhering here to a grassroots fantasy of art schools or some pseudo bullshit version of Cameron’s ‘Big Society’. I don’t have unbridled faith in the power of students to exclusively develop innovative art, autonomously. Conversely, however, at the moment there’s a compensatory overemphasis and faith in pedagogic innovation as the primary, at times it seems exclusive, means of generating energy within the art education system. Re-examining radical pedagogic practices from the 1960s is timely, but the power, control and authority, however much it is self-questioning, still lies with tutors. It’s an imposition of change from above, however well meaning. The folly on the part of city managers as to believing they can engineer



the evolution of culture in our cities has been proven to be oxymoronic to ‘real’ culture. There’s a similar danger within the art education system of believing pedagogic and technological innovations are ‘engines of change’. Not least, because the notion that art schools and art tutors can envisage the art of the future is as, it always has been, something that should be resisted or dismissed outright.

Playing God, Social Darwinism

“This government knows that culture and creativity matter. They matter because they can enrich all our lives, and everyone deserves the opportunity to develop their own creative talents and to benefit from others. They matter because our rich and diverse culture helps bring us together. They also matter because creative talent will be crucial to our individual and national economic success in the economy of the future.”

Tony Blair⁴⁰

There is another, grimly amusing aspect in which the application of a business ontology rebounds when judged against its own rhetoric; the consequences of neoliberal education restructuring directly contradict the stated aims of its education policy – producing dynamic, original thinkers for the knowledge economy. In this, the actuality of neoliberal practice, as opposed to its ideological rhetoric, is revealed. Its economic aggressive brand of Social Darwinism produces exactly the kind of conditions the neoliberal project was purported to rid society of, namely the stasis and stagnation of flattened, state controlled culture.

Harvey elucidates how neoliberal ideology and its beliefs in markets and managerialism are riddled with these kinds of transparent flaws and apparent contradictions. Some are nakedly self-serving, such as a deregulated private banking system that can’t be allowed to fail and must be shored up by increasing public debt. What might be presented as flaws in the system, for example

Book Bloc and their books at demonstrations in Rome, November 2010.

those which allow for the unregulated greed of individuals to ‘abuse the system’, are in reality, as Harvey and Klein have written, intrinsic structural features.

In a 2008 lecture, Judith Williamson referred to our society as being one where a culture of denial dominated.⁴¹ Within this culture we actively seek to ‘unknow’ basic facts of our existence – Williamson explicitly focuses on the inability to discuss global warming. We can think of this active unknowing as being another example of the kind of cognitive locking, that, as the much paraphrased remark by Slavoj Žižek, has meant it’s been easier to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism. Day by day it seems that this denial, this unknowing, this cognitive locking, is loosening its grip. Now, after forty years, the “political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites”⁴² is revealing itself in all its blunt, brutal greed and venality. The hollowness of the rhetoric of freedom, choice and liberty reverberates. The internal contradictions and brutal economic reality of this system are now so publicly known through personal experience as to undermine the authority of the daily common sense pronouncements of ‘capitalist realism’ – nobody needs a degree in economics to see this anymore. What’s more, the various ways consent for this system was previously manufactured and bought (easy credit) can no longer deliver on the promise of paying tomorrow for pleasure today.⁴³

Lord Browne’s 2010 review of Higher Education funding and student finance, ‘Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education’, rehashes the illusion of perfect competition, the sovereignty of consumer choice and demand – its suggestion, that the block grant for teaching be abolished; its overwhelming belief, that social value can only be thought of in ‘economic terms’. In a scathing overview of the review⁴⁴, Stefan Collini made clear the catastrophic consequences and ruinous folly of further adopting the business ontology within higher education – referred to as the requirement to ‘meet business needs’.

In Collini’s analysis, the report represents a blueprint for a devastating attack on the public role of universities in our social and cultural life. That we are now at pivotal moment is clear for Collini: “What is at stake is whether universities in the future are to be thought of as having a public cultural role partly sustained by public support, or whether we move further towards redefining them in terms of purely economic calculation of value and wholly individualistic conception of ‘consumer satisfaction’.”⁴⁵ He goes on to show how the consequences for higher education couldn’t be clearer: “the most likely effect of Browne’s proposals [...] will be to bring about a much closer correlation between the reputational hierarchy of institutions and the social class of their student body [...] ‘Free competition’ between rich and poor consumers means Harrods for the former and Aldi for the later: that’s what the punters have ‘chosen’.”⁴⁶

As I noted at the beginning, events have overtaken this article. Initially it was set to highlight a blind spot in much of the art world’s critical discussion of the future of art schools. The aforementioned failure to grasp the fundamental, intrinsic need for a principled adherence to and argument for comprehensive values as being absolutely core in art school culture. Not just as an ideal, but intrinsic in practice. It was based on what increasingly seems a rather cosy idea, namely that we will in the foreseeable future have more than, say, ten art schools in Britain (just the blue chip ones?). However, the severity of the present situation and the starkness of the choices facing us, means that the imperative to assert the absolute core values of comprehensive education (free, universal access for all and a commitment to a thoroughly diverse body of students) is, now more than ever, unquestionable. The pernicious capitalist realism that has labeled this as a fanciful utopian impossibility needs to be shown for what

it is. David Harvey is quite clear about the kind of immediate, imperative choices that need to be made:

“What I think is happening at the moment is that they are now looking for a new financial set-up which can solve the problem not for working people but for the capitalist class. I think they are going to find a solution for the capitalist class and if the rest of us get screwed, too bad. The only thing they would care about is if we rose up in revolt. And until we rise up in revolt they are going to redesign the system according to their own class interests. I don’t know what this new financial architecture will look like. If we look closely at what happened during the New York fiscal crisis I don’t think the bankers or the financiers knew what to do at all, now what they did was bit by bit arrive at a ‘bricolage’; they pieced it together in a new way and eventually they come up with a new construction. But whatever solution they may arrive at, it will suit them unless we get in there and start saying that we want something that is suitable for us. There’s a crucial role for people like us to raise the questions and challenge the legitimacy of the decisions being made at present, and to have very clear analyses of what the nature of the problem has been, and what the possible exits are.”⁴⁷

Notes

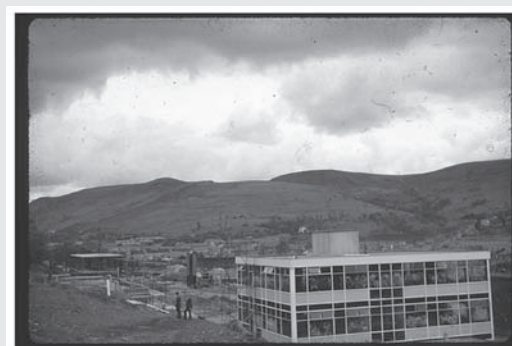
- 1 Jones, K, *New labour: The Inheritors in Education in Britain 1944 to the Present*, Cambridge, Polity, 2003
- 2 Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, 2007, p. 16
- 3 Naomi Klein: ‘Wall St. Crisis Should Be for Neoliberalism What Fall of Berlin Wall Was for Communism’, *Democracy Now*, October 6th 2008 http://www.democracynow.org/2008/10/6/naomi_klein
- 4 Michael Corris succinctly pointed out how the internalisation of this logic creates a key flaw in student criticisms, “while complaints about poor provision are legitimate, these are often tinged with the value for-money mentality of consumers who aren’t satisfied with what they expect from their purchase. In this situation, it is all too easy for managers to use the complaints of students against teaching staff, and the ‘customer is always right’ culture does little to accustom students to the experience of robust criticism or demands for intellectual rigor, while the weary hypocrisy of passing students who should be failed is imposed by managers who value the income far more than the educational standards of the teaching staff.” *Art Monthly*, issue 302
- 5 Fisher, M, *Capitalist Realism*, Zero books, 2009, p.42
- 6 Rogoff, I, ‘Academy as Potentiality’, in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y* eds Nollert, A, Rogoff, I, Baere de, B, Dziewior, Y, Esche, C, Niemann, K and Roelstrete, D. Frankfurt, 2006
- 7 Maria Walsh makes this point very well in her contribution to *Art Monthly*’s special on education. She also counter intuitively, and interestingly, offers some reasons for why we should be optimistic about the changing face of art school.
- 8 Few independent reports seem to disagree upon the impact of fee increases within the humanities, specifically on the levels of class exclusion.
- 9 ‘Art for a Few’, National Arts Learning Network, 2009
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 For more information on the Office for National Statistics social-economic classifications of occupation (NS-SeC), see <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/classifications/current/ns-sec/index.html>
- 13 ‘Art for a Few’, National Arts Learning Network, 2009; it’s worth mentioning that about one quarter of the applicants do not state their SEC status, so there is a significant ‘unknown’ to these figures.
- 14 ‘Glasgow “posher” than Oxbridge’, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 18th December 2002 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2002/dec/18/accesstouniversity.highereducation>
- 15 “Art for a Few”, National Arts Learning Network, 2009
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 202.
- 20 “After the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1970s, the share of national income of the top 1% of income earners in the US soared, to reach 15% (very close to its pre WWII share) by the end of the century. The top 0.1% of income earners in the US increased their share of the national income from 2% in 1978 to over 6% by 1999, while the ratio of the median compensation of workers to the salaries of CEOs increased from just over 30 to 1 in 1970 to nearly 500 to 1 by 2000”. Ibid. p. 16.
- 21 Gove’s plans use the rhetoric of choice and freedom to disguise a policy that is highly anti democratic

and actively seeks to increase social segregation – an educational apartheid that wholeheartedly welcomes the end of commitment to ‘mixed education’. This was clearly witnessed during a select committee cross examination in July 2010, when he gleefully spoke of all Afro-Caribbean schools, Muslim schools, etc.

- 22 A highly inappropriate piece of populist jargon, there is no lottery about it – the ability to send your children to the best schools is clearly directly linked to capital – i.e. having enough money to live somewhere expensive.
- 23 Giroux, H. A, ‘Teachers Without Jobs and Education Without Hope: Beyond Bailouts and the Fetish of the Measurement Trap’ (Part 2), *truthout*, June 8th 2010 http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles.htm
- 24 Whether it is an inability or a refusal is worth considering. I’m reminded here of Dave Beech’s argument regarding the problems of the left in ‘Seizing The Reins Of Power’, *Art Monthly* issue 294.
- 25 I’m not thinking of a value to come with alternative programmes of social organisation here. That is a problem but the first step, as with Thatcherism in the late ‘70s, would be to create a powerful set of core ideals capable of motivating people. At present it’s largely a case of a getting behind a reactive defense. In art school culture, for instance, it would be far more persuasive to demonstrate the appeal of collaboration, collective work, dialogue and constructive dissent as ‘attractive’, as opposed to tribal defence of individualised practices and reputations.
- 26 Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding Ethics of Commitment Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso, 2008, p. 103. I’ve some time for Paul Bowman’s use of ‘ConDemned’ <http://infinitethought.cinestatic.com/index.php/5449/>
- 27 Fraser, N, ‘Feminism, Capitalism And The Cunning Of History’, *New Left Review* 56, March-April 2009 http://www.newschool.edu/uploadedFiles/Faculty/NSSR/Fraser_NLR.pdf
- 28 Power, N, *One Dimensional Woman*, Winchester, Zero Books. 2009, p. 30.
- 29 The epistemological uncertainty that appears to be simultaneously art education’s biggest handicap and best source for progressive reinvention.
- 30 Groys, B, “Education by Infection” in, Art school: (propositions for the 21st century) MADOFF, S.H., ed., 2009, p. 29
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 With some reservations, I would suggest during the ‘60s, when the class composition of British art schools underwent something of a ‘challenge’.
- 33 Quoted in Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding Ethics of Commitment Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso. 2008
- 34 Pragna Patel, from Southall Black Sisters, *Red Pepper*, 2003
- 35 Parry, B, ‘Signs of Our Times: Discussion of Homi Bhabha’s “The Location of Culture”’, in *The Third text reader: on art, culture, and theory*, eds Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt, Ziauddin Sardar
- 36 Hassan, R, *The information society: A sceptical view*, Polity Press, 2008
- 37 As Mark E Smith muses on ‘Your Future our Clutter’ (2010).
- 38 The idea of a wholesale levelling out of cultural hierarchies has to be taken with a pinch of salt. I can’t see power relinquishing power that easily – it’s mutated for sure, but to say, pace class divisions, that it’s disappeared is self serving nonsense.
- 39 One coda: it’s important to be clear that SEC 4-7 students are not figured as inherently radical here, either in the history of British art schools or in any utopian imagined future idyll. There isn’t and never has been some pure potent chemical to be added to the mix and stepped back from. Indeed frequently they are, as a consequence of a poor national art curriculum, the most conservative students.
- 40 Jones, K, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present*, Polity Press, 2002, p. 165.
- 41 Williamson, J, ‘The Culture of Denial’, keynote lecture, Frieze Art Fair, http://www.friezeartfair.com/podcasts/details/the_culture_of_denial/
- 42 Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, 2007, p. 19
- 43 See Adam Curtis’ blog for a good overview: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/2010/02/the_economists_new_clothes.html
- 44 Collini, S, ‘Browne’s Gamble’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 32 No. 21. 4 November 2010 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble>
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Harvey, D, ‘The Crisis and the Consolidation of Class Power: Is This Really the End of Neoliberalism?’, *Counterpunch*, March 13/15 2009 <http://www.counterpunch.org/harvey03132009.html>

Comprehensive Education

The 1944 Education Act raised the school-leaving age to 15 and provided universal free schooling in three academically differentiated types of schools – streamed entry was based on “accident of innate ability”; selection at the age of eleven via the 11+ exam. Following the 1964 General Election, the Labour government instructed all local authorities to prepare plans for the creation of a common *comprehensive* education system of new schools, either by amalgamation of existing schools or by building new ones. Clyde Chitty, in 2002, reflected on differing conceptions of comprehensive education, past triumphs and mistakes, thus: “...many genuinely believed that a capitalist society could be reformed, and that the new comprehensive schools would be a peaceful means of achieving greater social equality – greater social equality in the sense that working-class children would be able to move into ‘white-collar’ occupations or move on to higher education.



Building Treorchy Comprehensive School, May 1964

Writing in 1965, for example, leading sociologist A.H. Halsey could begin a *New Society* article with the ringing declaration: ‘*Some people, and I am one, want to use education as an instrument in pursuit of an egalitarian society. We tend to favour comprehensive schools, to be against the public schools, and to support the expansion of higher education (Halsey, 1965, p. 13).*’ Other social reformers believed in the idea of the ‘social mix’ – the theory which anticipated the steady amelioration of social class differences and tensions through pupils’ experience of ‘social mixing’ in a new comprehensive school. This very narrow view of egalitarianism could be found in one of *Circular 10/65*’s definitions of a comprehensive school: ‘*A comprehensive school aims to establish a school community in which pupils over the whole ability range and with differing interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process (DES, 1965, P. 8).*’ ...



Building Treorchy Comprehensive School, May 1964

Apart from any other considerations, the emphasis on promoting ‘social equality’ or ‘social cohesion’ in a capitalist society had the undesirable, if not entirely unexpected, effect of setting up useful targets for the enemies of reform to aim at.”

‘The Right To A Comprehensive Education’, Second Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, Clyde Chitty, November 16th 2002